

## Developing Capacity for Disability Studies

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The paradigm change from medical and economic models to psychosocial and political-cultural necessitates training of a wide variety of academic disciplines that have not been the traditional focus of government or foundation support. A basic issue facing the disability and university communities is how best to integrate the study of disability into curricula.

Should programs in disability studies be formed much like woman's studies and African-American programs where faculty are employed to teach specific courses in these topics? Or if the goal of people with disabilities is to be included in the culture, then should the course materials be dispersed to each academic department with the understanding that disability as a subject of importance to the academic discipline be covered in the context of the basic principles of each discipline? Will this approach reduce the topic of disability to a trivial fifteen minute portion of a yearly lecture? Can universities afford to hire sufficient numbers of staff to cover a wide variety of courses where disability might be an important topic?

One possible solution to this dilemma is to support the development of a "network for disability studies" through video-lecture series, WWW pages, interactive internet, interactive CD-ROM or other communication innovations currently under development. To provide a stimulating and comprehensive content for such a "network for disability studies" the Switzer Senior Fellowships could be directed towards building content for course lectures.

Another approach to establishing disability studies programs at institutions of higher learning is to find funding for a consortium of faculty from different universities within the same geographic region to lecture at each of the member institutes on the topic of their specific expertise. This approach would reduce the need to have experts on a variety of topics related to disability at each campus and to develop high quality programs in disability studies at each campus.

A third approach might be to host an international conference on the topic of disability studies in higher education. Invited participants would present the disability studies programs currently operating in their university environments. The products of such a conference would be a published conference proceedings, a rich reference list, a general set of guidelines for teaching disability studies at undergraduate and graduate levels, and a network of people from many different academic backgrounds who may chose to begin collaborative activities with the colleagues they meet at the conference.

Training programs in disability studies should vary from very brief training sessions through multi-year experiences. A continuum of training needs to be developed for a better appreciation of the importance of disability issues to our society by all members of the society.

This continuum of education can begin as early as pre-school with programs that teach and appreciate the great diversity of abilities and personalities that constitute the human race. In junior and senior high school, the textbooks and core curricula need to incorporate disability issues. The value of working for and with people with disabilities needs to be integrated into the value system that drives occupational choice. Vocational educational programs should include personal assistant services as a career option.

Partnering with the Office of Special Education Services, demonstration programs could be developed to teach disability related issues from grade school through senior high school. Undergraduate classes in disability studies could include reviews of the influence of disability on society as well as society's influence on disability. Different disciplines could include disability related topics within the confines of each field of study including engineering, architecture, interior design, city planning, horticultural, landscaping, mass transit planning, psychology, literature, communication, history, economics, dance, music, genetics, biology and more. The same could apply to graduate training.

Support for the development of curricula content and lectures could be influential in expanding

the base of support for inclusion of disability issues in courses from kindergarten through post-graduate education. Funds could be solicited for competitions that would reward the course materials that are innovative and effective in teaching students about issues of importance to people with disabilities. Funding Summer Institutes on Rehabilitation Research would provide a avenue for examination of topics requiring immediate attention or for reviews of topic areas where recent advances in understanding disability need to be better disseminated within the research community.

The innovative Grant mechanism could be used to accomplish this goal but would require an increase in duration of the award from one year to multiple years and an increase in the funds from \$50,000 to \$100,000 annually. Each RRTC and RERC could provide the summary findings in specific areas of research that have implications for improved practice for practitioners or positive adapting skills for people with disabilities. In addition, the Summer Institutes would be an excellent forum for Switzer fellows to present their work.

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